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# **WHAT'S IN THE COOKIE JAR: YOUNG CHILDREN'S ACCOUNTS OF SNACKING**

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## **Abstract**

This paper looks at children's accounts of snacking and how they regard this mode of eating. It argues that understanding children's snacking may require us to look more closely at what happens inside the home rather than simply focusing on children's expenditure outside the home. What's in the cookie jar is about how children respond to family food rules about snacks, the contribution they make to those decisions and how they relate to these eating occasions.

# WHAT'S IN THE COOKIE JAR: YOUNG CHILDREN'S ACCOUNTS OF SNACKING

## Introduction

The 'Snack Swapper Wheel' is part of the latest Change4Life campaign from the UK Department of Health to encourage parents to help their children swap unhealthy for healthy snacks (NHS 2010). Using the 'snack swapper'<sup>1</sup> parents and children can identify healthy snack alternatives to their usual snack, pudding or breakfast. This initiative reflects a growing concern over the consumption of unhealthy snacks, those high in fat, sugar, or salt, among young consumers. It is not snacking per se that is the problem rather the type of snacks that are being consumed, hence the 'snack swapper'. Much of the debate around snacking has centred on these heavily marketed snacks.

Sales of snack foods<sup>2</sup> in the UK were estimated at 2.15bn in 2007 (crisps and nuts) with confectionary turning around 4.13 bn (see Market and Research Reports 2008) When asked what they purchase with their pocket money the most popular choices among 5-16 year olds were sweets and chocolate, (54%) along with crisps and snacks (45%) (Childwise 2009). But self purchase is constrained by children's purchasing power and sales of snack foods give little indication of who is buying these products or who is eating them. The ubiquity of snacks in children's food culture is perhaps indicative of a change in the ways in which we regard snacks and snacking. Rather than being seen as an occasional treat snacks have become a regular feature in many children's diets throughout the meal system and closely tied in to family systems of reward and punishment (Curtis and Fischer 2007, BHF 2008).

Concerns around children's snacking relate to the ways in which these snacks, usually HFSS, are being marketed to children (Marshall et al 2007, Which 2006, Sustain

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v76VaMZQf4>

<sup>2</sup> Included within the children's food and drinks category are biscuits, breakfast cereals, cheese, chocolate confectionary, flavoured milk, frozen foods, fruit drinks (and other soft drinks, ice cream, savoury snacks, confectionary, along with yoghurts and chilled desserts.

2009). There have been numerous calls to restrict or ban increasingly sophisticated marketing techniques that include television advertising and use of techniques such as using cartoon characters, or text messages, promoting products on line via websites, games, on-line advertising, sponsorship and product placements (Which 2006). Schor and Ford (2007) argue that *‘..children are being persuaded to eat particular foods, not on the basis of their tastiness, or other benefits, but because of their place in the social matrix of meaning. As this process expands, branded (i.e., junk) food comes to occupy and increasingly central position in children’s sense of identity, their relationship to other children and adults, and the construction of meaning and value that structures their lives’* (2007:16). They suggest that this oppositional positioning of junk food contributes to its perception as ‘cool’.

This paper looks at children’s accounts of snacking and how they regard this mode of eating. It offers an ‘entrée’ into their perspective on food and snacking and in the process reveals what children consider to be important in relation to this aspect of eating. It highlights the importance of the family eating environment and context on snack choice and illustrates the extent to which snacking is regulated by parents. Understanding children’s snacking may require us to look more closely at what happens inside the home rather than simply focusing on children’s expenditure outside the home. What’s in the cookie jar is about how children respond to family food rules about snacks, the contribution they make to those decisions and how they relate to these eating occasions.

### **Snacks to sweets: Snac(kets)**

The term ‘snacks’ is subject to a wide interpretation and is seen as somewhat ambiguous (Chamontin et. al. 2003). Yet snacks have a number of defining features, they usually quick, involve single food items that require little or no cooking or preparation, are portable and often eaten with the hands. Moreover, they can fill the ‘nutritional gaps’ between meals and are often defined by what they are not, that is, meals. (Makela 2000, Marshall 2005). Recent research on snacking and meal patterns among Scottish school children confirmed that certain foods such as crisps and snacks, confectionary and to a lesser extent biscuits, cakes and pastries are more

commonly associated with snack occasions than meal occasions. While these individual foods are not exclusive to snacks, for example, soft drinks (diet and non diet) and fruit were more likely to be consumed as part of a meal rather than a snack, many are associated with snack occasions and categorised as (nutritionally) 'bad', although this is not always the case (McDairmaid et al 2009). Children were eating an average of two snacks per day but what constituted a snack food depended on whether it was eaten as part of a meal or on it's own as a snack. The shift towards more snacking, for some, is seen as part of a broader de-structuration and individualisation of eating that has been described as 'grazing', 'nibbling' or 'eating on the go' (*spisning I forbifarten* in Danish) (Makela 2009). Concerns over this shift towards 'gastro-anomie' reflect broader concerns about the demise of the family (meal) and a trend towards individualization (Fischler 1988).

James (1982) illustrates the contrasting worlds of adults and children in her discussion of 'kets' - a term used by children to refer to cheaper sweets and by adults to refer to the 'rubbish' that children eat between meals. She argues that children's worlds, while largely dependent on adults, are nevertheless separate and this dependency is itself subject to a creative process of interdependence. As she notes – *'children construct their own ordered system of rules by reinterpreting the social models given to them by adults...hence the true nature of the culture of childhood frequently remains hidden from adults, for the semantic cues which permit social recognition have been manipulated and disguised by children in terms of their alternative society'* (James 1982: 295). She illustrates how this term - ket - has come to denote a particular type of sweet, usually cheaper, unwrapped with names that represent the antithesis of food. These stand in stark contrast to the adult world where sweets are more like traditional sweetmeats and much closer to what James calls 'metonymic meals'. Moreover, for adults, sweets are not seen as everyday items but often associated with festive or special occasions such as Christmas. Unlike many other aspects of their food consumption 'kets' are controlled by children rather than adults and representative of the differences between the adult and child. James has argued elsewhere that children's food is symbolic of children's separateness.

Zeihner (2001) challenges the idea of children as simply dependent on their parents and argues that children's status within families is changing. Children are increasingly

dependent on the family unit but at the same time there is evidence of both independent activities and a degree of interdependency. This participation depends on the extent to which 'childness' is pursued within the family (Alanen 2001, James et al 2009). While children's preferences (independence) are accommodated in certain families where they are seen as equal in other situations parental generational differences exist and autonomy is discouraged (dependency). There is a state of semi-independent status where preferences are accommodated depending on parental approval. (James et al. 2009). Children are playing a greater role in family decisions relating to food with families (read mothers) increasingly accommodating children's preferences in family provisioning. Evidence from Denmark suggests that snacking is one area where children are likely to exert an influence over what they eat (Nørgaard et. al. 2007). In some families they are being actively encouraged to participate in decision making around food but the degree of influence depends on family structure as well as the nature of the occasion (Lee and Beatty 2002, Zeiher 2001, Torrance 1998, Gunter and Furnham 1998). Dixon and Brandwell's research suggests that 'child-centred' parenting and the 'democratisation of children's rights' (2004:190) are placing new pressures on mothers attempting to provide a healthy diet faced with children's requests for heavily marketed mass produced and processed food. Fast food is increasingly seen as 'junk food' and for mothers of young children it is food 'out of place' (Cook 2009) - *'..the concern with nutrition and commercial food revolves around the mothers' control or lack thereof regarding the timing and introduction of junk. Yet, it is many of these same kinds of items and brands that provide fodder for children's constructions of their own identities, often through a sense of propriety, of cultural ownership, of certain kinds of edibles'* (Cook 2009:120). This raises an issue around the extent to which food forms part of children's identities, in contrast to other products like clothes, or toys, or music.

## **Methods**

Given the exploratory nature of the research this is a primarily qualitative investigation with Scottish primary school children (n=107) supplemented by a quantitative survey administered to the same group. The aim is to allow us to explore children's own experiences of food, in this case snacks, and how they negotiate and

interpret these structures (Miles 2000). The research brief included asking children about their favourite foods and snacking activities. Specific research objectives, addressed in this paper, were to examine children's

1. 'everyday' eating experiences and their perception of snacks and snacking
2. input and influence over what they eat
3. access to snack foods and their degree of discretionary consumption

In order to examine the children's own perspective focus group discussions were used to reveal the issues that were relevant to the children themselves (Gunter and Furnham 1998: 158-159). The study was conducted with children aged between 8 and 11 years old from a state primary school and a private (fee paying) primary school, in Edinburgh, Scotland. Both schools were located in predominantly middle class catchment areas. Permission to talk to the children was granted by the Head teacher who approved this with the classroom teachers and parents. Each parent was sent a letter describing the research project and requesting permission for the children to take part. Further permission was requested from the relevant educational authorities. The purpose of the research was explained to the children.

The state school visits (n=56) took place in May 2006. These are convenience samples selected to obtain a range of views on food and snacking behaviour of 8-12 year old children. Two focus groups were conducted by the researcher with Primary 4 children (aged 8 and 9 years old) and two with Primary 6 children (aged 10 and 11 years old). The private school interviews (n=51) were carried out in November and December 2006. Two discussion groups were conducted with Primary 5 children (aged 9 years old) and Primary 6 (aged 10 years old). The groups contained both boys and girls and were conducted in the classroom with the teacher present. Just over half the sample were aged 10/11 and included an equal number of boys and girls. Groups were audio recorded and the discussions lasted an average of thirty five minutes each. A total of 107 children participated in the focus groups.

Focus groups were followed up with an in class questionnaire survey on snacking that was administered by the teacher and then collected by the researcher. This asked a series of questions covering snacking and media activities, favourite snacks, and

decision making around snacks as well as asking them about pocket money and what they spent their money on. As the research focus was on children's own perceptions their accounts were not qualified or verified with parents, guardians or teachers. The following sections report on some of the findings.

### **Snacking occasions**

Snacking is an integral part of children's food consumption experience and something that they experience both inside and outside of the domestic home, reflecting the 'portable' aspect of this eating occasion. Snacks are prepared and eaten in home; prepared at home and eaten outside; prepared and eaten outside the home; and prepared outside the home and eaten inside. Most of the discussion centred on snacks eaten at home with some discussion of snacks eaten outside the home. The term 'snack' was used by the children to refer to both specific food items and the eating event itself, reflecting some of the ambiguity around the term (Chamoutin et. al. 2003). 'Snack foods' was a somewhat broad term encompassing a wide range of food items from crisps, chocolate, and confectionary, as well as sugary breakfast cereals and fast foods that feature in much of the debate around children's snacking through to more wholesome biscuits and cakes and healthier fruit and vegetable items. Indeed a number of 'snacks', usually home based, might be better described as 'mini meals' and included foods such as beans on toast, bacon rolls, bread and jam, or sandwiches - usually prepared by adults for the children. As the following quote shows snacks are not confined to high fat, sugar, salt foods

*INT Well – what do you think a snack is? .....*

- I think it's like toast with something on or something like that – or an apple.*
- Isn't that a healthy meal or something?*

*INT Anyone else? That's a good point XX(boy). XX(boy) what do you think a snack is?*

- I would just say a few something or like a wee chocolate bar or something. A small thing. Or, say you were taking some fruit, just a few...*

*INT What about the girls – XX(girl) what do you think a snack is?*

- I would say like a biscuit or something.*
- A biscuit or crisps.*
- Crisps!*

*INT XX(girl)?*

- Well, something small.*
- Yeah a small thing*



*INT So a snack is...*

- Yeah, kind of small. Not big.*
- Say like some crisps or something*

For these children, eating snack foods, both at home and at school, was associated with particular types of eating occasion - usually informal with eating coming second to some other activity be that doing homework, watching television, playing sport or hanging out with friends. While snacks are usually seen as one area of children's food consumption where they exercise some choice this research suggests that much more of their snack activity is regulated by parents, certainly for the 8-12 years age group. There is some evidence of children exercising choice but this is constrained within family rules about snacking and determined by what children are permitted in terms of access in both the domestic and the wider 'environment'.

Insert Figure 1

The range of snack occasions that children participate in was evident in the group discussions. These are depicted in figure 1 which looks at snacks in relation to their location inside or outside the home and whether they are seen as an opportunity to (re) fuel or as a treat. Snack occasions can be located within this matrix to reflect differences in the relation to the relative influence of parents and children on what is eaten.

### Inside snacks

There were a number of snack occasions at home and these included snacking while engaged with media, or doing school work, or relaxing. Much of the discussion centred on television snacking and just under one third of the children (n=105) reported snacking in front of the television often or most days, with less than half of doing so often or everyday. Another third never or rarely snacked in front of the television with the remainder reporting sometimes. Proportionately more of the pupils at the private school were likely to report snacking in front of the television often or most days, otherwise there was no clear distinction between the two groups. The range of snacks was quite varied across the group. The most popular television snacks, perhaps surprisingly, were fruit/vegetables (28% of responses) followed by

crisps (18%) and then biscuits/crisps (14%). When foods were reclassified as healthy/unhealthy television snacks just over half of the choices (53%) were healthy. This may not be unrelated to the fact that when asked more generally who chooses the snack foods around two thirds of the children report that their parents choose reflecting a snack occasion that is largely mediated by parents. However, it is clear that a high proportion of foods consumed in front of the television are not healthy raising issues around sedentary activities and snacking (Kline 2005, Coon and Tucker 2002). In discussions children spoke about different types of snack being associated with different viewing times, so it may be a biscuit when watching television after school, or a piece of fruit but if watching a movie with friends sweets were more likely to be eaten, reflecting the focus on leisure and relaxation rather than sustenance or using the snack as a 'stop-gap' until dinner. On these occasions there is likely to be more negotiation. A number of the children talked about certain snacking rituals, for example the after school snack that marks the end of the school day, or popcorn while watching a movie. Rules about snacking were closely tied to meal times and focused on how it would affect what they ate at meals. Snacks were seen as separate eating occasions but closely related to meals.

In contrast to television snacking over three quarters of the children never or rarely snacked while using the computer. The rationale was a practical one it is difficult to eat and type (or surf) and in many cases eating or drinking while on the computer was prohibited. This was one area where eating, along with the computer time, was usually monitored. Once again food was seen as incidental to the event. At home most of snack consumption was *mandated* by parents either directly by limiting or restricting access to certain foods or indirectly ensuring that only certain snacks are available at home.

### Outside snacks

While much of the discussion centred on snacking at home there were a number of snack occasions that occurred outside the domestic environment and even here there was some degree of mediation either by the school authorities or by parents. The issue of food promotion in schools is the subject of much debate but snack food is brought into the school in schoolbags and lunchboxes. Children talked about snacks in terms

of the 'break time' snacks or packed lunches, usually a combination of a filled sandwich or roll and a snack. Children did *negotiate* with parents over the contents of their packed lunch usually in terms of the sandwich filling (the omission of the sandwich was not an option) and the type of snack provided usually included crisps, a chocolate bar and/or a piece of fruit. In this case the snacks referred to the snack food rather than the eating event. Once again the health issue emerged as unhealthy choices were balanced with a healthy option. Most of the children in this study were aware of healthy eating messages and featured healthy products among their favourite snacks, although the more sceptical might suggest that this is as likely to reflect their parent's wishes and is suggestive of the importance of the domestic environment in shaping their individual choices.

Concerns about children snacking outside of the home relate to their independent purchase of less healthy snack foods yet only 15% of this group reported spending their pocket money on snacks. When asked specifically about snack food expenditure chocolate (32%) and fizzy drinks (17%) proved most popular, in line with other research (Childwise 2009). One explanation may be that as most of the snacks eaten at home and at school are provided by their parents the children do not need to spend their own money on these items.

### Snacks as fuel

Snacks were seen by the children as something small to 'keep them going' to meal times or as a way of replacing lost energy. This might include snacks at home after school or when doing homework, as schools finish around 3.30 p.m. the snack 'ties them over' until the evening meal. In other cases snacks are eaten when playing sports as the following quotes illustrate

*-Well, I do my sports (diving) 6 days a week, for 2 and a half hours and I have to eat every 2 hours otherwise I just get really tired, so in the last half an hour I normally have some jaffa cakes or a piece of fruit or something. (School A, girl 10)*

*-I just use snacks if I'm like playing sport or if I'm out and I need some energy to keep me going. I might have some Lucozade or a biscuit just to keep me going. (School B, boy 10)*

Snacks were seen as a way to stave off hunger or to replace lost energy and this was reflected in the finding that almost half of the children (n=103) ate snacks often or most days after playing sport. In some cases bars of chocolate were offered as a reward for good performance, scoring a try in rugby, or a goal in football, or getting a good time on the running track. This use of confectionary as a reward for good behaviour or performance at school, track or in the class, was also reported by some of the children. The association of confectionary with reward has been reported elsewhere (Fischer and Birch 2007). In the classroom survey over one tenth of the children said they never snacked.

There was some discussion about favourite snacks and the foods they liked – chocolate, crisps, or even certain brands, but for the most part the children talked about general product categories of snack rather than specific brands, and mainly in terms of taste. There was little evidence of children talking about snacks, even commercial brands, in terms of what they signified (see Schor and Ford 2007). Food, for most of these 8-11 year olds was seen as functional – to temporarily suppress hunger, replenish energy and selected mainly on the basis of taste. Indeed few of the children could see any other reason for selecting favourite snacks (or foods in general for that matter) confirming the importance of taste (see Ludvigsen and Scott 2009). What makes snack foods different from a number of other foods they eat is that most are ready to eat and require little additional preparation so children can get snacks for themselves without any adult involvement. This gives them some degree of independence in a food system where they are almost solely reliant on parents/guardians to provide for them. However, much of the negotiation around snacking relates to what types of snacks they are permitted and how much they are allowed to eat. Healthy items are more readily accessible and not so heavily sanctioned for these children compared to less healthy options.

### Snacks as fun treats

On certain occasions snacks were seen as treats, for example watching a movie on television at home or at a friend's house. On these occasions less healthy options are

more likely to be served. It is not clear how the positioning of snacks as either healthy or unhealthy will change children's perceptions of these food items, but as Cook (2009) notes 'candy here becomes a 'treat' or 'reward' for eating proper foods at proper times and thus serves as a semantic marker delineating proper from 'improper' as well as adult from child. A 'treat' becomes something special or apart from the everyday only when placed in an overall sequence of eating events' (2009: 120). This was the case with movie snacks where specific foods, such as popcorn, were seen as an integral part of this snack occasion. The type of snack eaten signifies the nature of the event. The less healthy snacks appear to be part of this 'treat' category and allow a reprieve from normal rules of eating yet some of the irreverent fun that surrounds snacking is being lost in a debate around health.

### **Raiding the cookie jar: challenging the rules**

Snacking at home took three forms children either (1) asked their parents if they could have a snack and parents would get the snacks where children were not permitted direct access; (2) were allowed to access the snacks themselves but were required to ask permission before they could eat the snacks; (3) or had free access and could get snacks for themselves. This depended on the type of snack and the occasion, access to healthy items was generally open compared to other snack foods especially where these were considered less healthy or required further preparation or cooking. All of the children were clear about family rules and regulations around snacks such as not eating too many at once, or not eating either close to meal times or at the end of the day, after brushing their teeth. While these rules were accepted children did talk about some of the ways they had devised to get snacks when denied by their parents. Many saw this as a way to assert their own independence and outwit their parent's attempts to restrict access, usually to less healthy items. This is aligned in some ways with the notion of snacking as oppositional to meals but it reveals a degree of ingenuity on the part of the children and an opportunity for them to exert some 'independence' from parental authority. While it is clear that they are still highly dependent on their parents to purchase the snack food the issue of access related to both what snacks were available and when they could eat these.

There was a high degree of variability in relation to practice within different households, in some cases children were able to openly access snacks but most had to ask permission from their parents and few were able to simply go and get what they wanted, as the following quote illustrates

- *So I like have sweets and sandwiches and grapes and stuff like that and I just watch a programme in front of the TV with my brother.*
- INT *And are you allowed to get those yourself?*
- *No, my mum does it for me, because I can't reach stuff and do stuff on my own.*
- INT *So is there certain stuff that's kept out of the way?*
- *Well, out of my reach, yes – but I could like climb stuff and then catch it but I wouldn't dare.*
- INT *So, what sort of things are out of your reach?*
- *Well, on the top shelf there's like Kitkats and stuff like that – popcorn, like bags, you know like the flat bags and they pop up? I'm not allowed to get them and I can 't reach it and even with a chair it's a bit too high and I'd have to climb if I wanted to get it. But I wouldn't...*  
(School A, 9 years old, Boy)

The issue was not over whether the children will get the snacks rather when, and in what quantity. Any attempt at clandestine activity or raiding the kitchen cupboard was seen as a revolt against when, not if, they would get the snacks. Some of the children felt that their parents knew they were raiding the 'cookie jar' but for others they were adamant that their parents remained blissfully ignorant. Taking snacks without permission represented a fourth way of accessing snacks and in taking this action children were asserting some degree of independence in their snack choice, at least in a temporal sense although this was not necessarily sanctioned by their parents and conditional on what was actually available at home. This involved evasive strategies that included hiding sweet wrappers or disposing of the evidence and reflected a degree of savvy in terms of acknowledging that such behaviour was against their parents wishes and required strategies to avoid detection, as the following quote illustrates

- 
- *Well when we're buying sweets, me and my brother just take them and then we go and watch TV and then once we're finished with them, so our parents don't see them in the bin we just stuff them down the back of the couch.*
- DM *And what's that you usually eat when you're watching TV?*
- *Not really sweets - crisps and chocolate and stuff*
- *Double Deckers!*

- *I only like wee things though, like whole wheat Aeros*
  - *If I don't ask...*
  - DM *Anyone on this side? Rosie, what about you?*
  - *I sometimes nick little bits of chocolate because I love it so much and I know my mum sometimes says no.*
  - *I just take it sometimes!*
  - *Yes, if they say no you always take it.*
  - *Yes – if they say no, I try and sneak it.*
  - *I know where the chocolate is. It's got like 2 big things of chocolate and it's in the fridge.*
  - DM *XX (girl) – you've got your hand up at the back. What about you?*
  - *I've forgotten.*
  - DM *XX (girl)?*
  - *I ask my mum or my dad and if they say yes I take loads and if they say no, I take them anyway.*
  - DM *XX (girl), what about you?*
  - *I have them on Fridays.*
  - DM *So you've got a particular day when you have those things?*
  - *I used to have*
  - *I'd probably get some after school*
- (School B, mixed, 9)*

This conflict over access was only articulated in relation to snacks such as crisps, confectionary and chocolate and further serves to heighten the focus on health in relation to snacking. The children were aware of the healthy eating messages and knew broadly what was healthy and unhealthy, usually described as junk food. What is more they accepted the idea that it was not good for them to eat too much junk food and most relied on their parents to provide snacks and give guidance, reiterating the point that these children are highly reliant on parents for what they eat, and see them as role models. Certain snack products, it seems, are already part of a reward system.

## **Discussion**

Snacking appears to be an integral part of these children's everyday food experience and is about fun and relaxing the (normal) rules; the problem is that rather than being seen as an occasional treat snacks have become a regular feature of children's food (BHF 2008, Nobel et al 2007). This research suggest that children see snacks as part of a broader meal system and recognise these as distinct eating events that have different rules, many of which are sanctioned by parents. Snacking is associated with 'doing other things' besides eating and the nature of the foods eaten and the occasions

reflect that. In many ways the food is secondary to the other activities and associated as much with sustenance as it is with identity. This paper argues that part of the appeal of snacks lies in their opposition to the normal rules about eating. In this respect snacks appear to have a dual purpose both as an important part of children's food socialization, reflecting the interdependence between children and parents, and at the same time an opportunity for children to establish their own meaning and identity, independent of adults (James 1982, Zeiher 2001). Schor and Ford (2007) argue that children identify with food brands as part of their identity construction but this research suggest that they identify as much with the snacking occasions as they do with the snack food brands and taste remains an important decision criterion. Although, eating outside the home with peers rather than family may present a different set of food priorities.

Finally, as Davis and White (2006) note, just because children know what is good for them this does not guarantee that they will choose healthy items, similarly just because children know what is bad for them does not guarantee they will avoid those foods particularly when there are other factors besides nutrition that are associated with the eating event. What adults, and nutritionists, fail to see is that snacking is often about fun and relaxing the rules. The question is can healthy snacking be fun? Rather than prohibiting snacks we need to consider ways of allowing children to assert their own independence and engage both children, and parents, in the finding ways to snack more healthily. In terms of policy success for initiatives such as the snack wheel depend on children and parents collaborating to make dietary changes.



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Figure 1: Children's snack occasions

